

INTRODUCTION

What Is Graphic Design?

“What is graphic design?” I ask my students during the first class meeting of the semester. They stare back at me quite perplexed, and I have generally come to expect this kind of response. Graphic design in our culture lacks clear boundaries that give it a simple definition. I can see it will be up to me to provide an answer. I tell them, “Graphic design is the most ubiquitous of all the art forms since it can be found everywhere and anywhere—in our homes, in the restaurants we frequent, on the streets we walk, on the highways we drive, in the movies and theaters we attend, and in every shop we enter.”

It takes only a few seconds for them to visualize this information, and then their expressions register understanding. I am now at the blackboard, chalk in hand, ready to make a list. “Let’s list the most obvious examples of graphic design that come to mind.” It doesn’t take long before someone calls out, “Advertising.” Everyone nods in approval. “Is there a difference between advertising and graphic design, and if so, what is it?” I venture to ask. Silence. They are all stumped, and again no one offers up an answer. They think this is a pop quiz, and no one wants to risk giving a dumb answer.

“In the old days,” I begin, “when I attended art school, the definition of graphic design was the promotion of goods and services and the definition of advertising was the selling of goods and services.” Ah, it was so simple then, but this is no longer the case.

“It is no exaggeration to say that designers are engaged in nothing less than the manufacture of contemporary reality. Today, we live and breathe design. Few of the experiences we value at home, at leisure, in the city or the mall are free of its alchemical touch. We have absorbed design so deeply into ourselves that we no longer recognize the myriad ways in which it prompts, cajoles, disturbs and excites us. It’s completely natural. It’s just the way things are.”

—Rick Poynor

The boundaries between promoting and selling have totally blurred with the arrival of global branding (the promotion of lifestyle through the selling of a particular product or service). Promotion and selling have simply joined forces.

A more contemporary definition of graphic design might include the “art” of communication—to inform, educate, influence, persuade, and provide a visual experience—one that combines art and technology to communicate messages vital to our daily lives. It is simply a cultural force.

What Do Graphic Designers Do?

The graphic designer conceives, plans, and executes a design that communicates a direct message to a specific audience. The term *design* refers to the planned arrangement of visual elements organized and prioritized into a cohesive whole that becomes the visual message. Graphic designers work in business and industry as well as in the cultural and educational sectors of contemporary society. Their work is mass-produced in print, film, and electronic media—books, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, corporate identity, packaging, posters, CDs and multimedia, Web sites, billboards, television and film graphics, environmental and transportation signage, maps, charts, and other forms of information design.

Basically, graphic designers develop images to represent the ideas their clients want to communicate. This is usually accomplished by combining images (photographs, film, video, art, or illustration) and words (typography) into a unified form that responds to the content and conveys a clear message.

I Want to Be a Graphic Designer—Where Do I Begin?

Many freshmen interested in graphic design at my college ask me this question, often anticipating that the answer will involve learning computer graphics software. They look surprised when they learn they need to take foundation courses in basic design principles (2-D and 3-D) and observational or life drawing first. They need to draw and develop basic visual language vocabularies in order to communicate so that others will understand.

Visual language consists of the basic elements of two- and three-dimensional design: line, shape, texture, value, color, composition, volume, mass, and space, and how they combine to create balance, unity, proportion, rhythm, and sequence. It is beyond the scope of this book to detail this information beyond the brief summary of terms I offer in section 1: The Elements and Principles of Design. For this reason I have included an extensive bibliography that lists many fine books devoted to explaining the principles of two- and three-dimensional design.

This book is a compilation of forty-two introductory graphic design and typography assignments developed and written by creative and informed graphic design educators from the United States and abroad. Each assignment offers students a challenging encounter with creative problem solving. Before undertaking any assignment in this book, students will need to understand the basic relationship between *content* and *form*. The term *content* implies the subject matter or the information to be communicated to the viewer, and *form* is the purely visual aspect. Simply stated, content is what

"Visual language can convey facts and ideas in a wider and deeper range than almost any other means of communication. It can reinforce the static verbal concept with the sensory vitality of dynamic imagery."
— Gyorgy Kepes

you want to say, and form is how you choose to say it. This relationship is negotiated during the first stage of the *design process*, the term for the steps taken before arriving at a finished design solution.

The Design Process

In professional practice, the design process usually begins with the clarification of the client's objectives (the content) and continues through an analytical phase in which the objective is further clarified and detailed. The process progresses through a visualization phase in which the overall look and feel of the piece is determined (the form).

"It is common practice among designers, especially young designers, to look for inspiration for their own designs from other designers and their work. Although someone's solution to a particular communications problem may spark a unique solution to another's problem, the practice of turning to other designers' work for ideas also influences an inappropriate pursuit of style and trend that can ultimately undermine the substance and purpose of design."

— Mark Oldach

In the classroom, the design process begins with the introduction of an assignment. It is important to listen to the instructor, who emphasizes the objectives, just as a professional designer listens to the client articulate objectives. An *objective* is the desired result, or goal, of any course of action. In design, our course of action is to project a message to a specified audience in the hope of obtaining a desired response from them. A clear definition and understanding of the problem at hand are essential to a successful project.

Once you have been given the assignment, you need to define your objectives. It is too easy to get stuck on preconceived ideas that might appear brilliant at first but create blocks to future development. The most brilliant idea is quite useless if it doesn't communicate the message or reach its intended audience. Here are steps you can follow to guide you through the design process:

1. Define the Problem and Establish Your Objectives

What is the message? Who is it for? What format can best express the message? What are the budget constraints? Creative success starts with a combination of good listening skills and asking pertinent questions. It is impossible to solve a problem you don't understand.

"Design activity is often referred to as a problem or series of problems. While the word problem in this context may seem negative, it actually signifies a challenge, an opportunity to create a successful and meaningful outcome."

— John Bowers

2. Do the Research

Learn about the subject at hand. Look for parallels in other fields, subjects, time periods, and industries. Are there any key words to define the objective? The more information you collect from multiple sources, the more associations you can make between them. Your own experiences and memories can be rich sources for inspiration. In fact, inspiration can be found just about anywhere, so carry a sketchbook to record your ideas as they occur. Besides writing and sketching, you can use your sketchbook to paste in collected items for later use.

3. Develop Your Ideas by Brainstorming

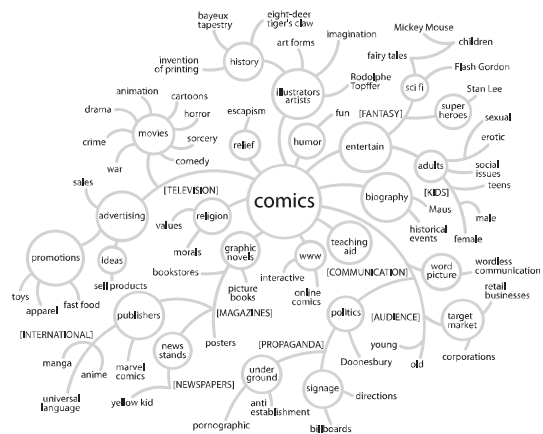
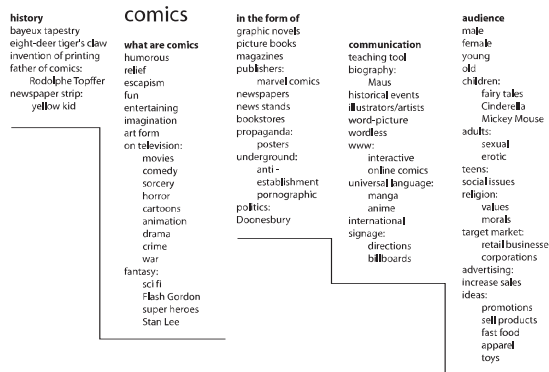
Brainstorming is an idea-generating process based on free association that uses a written record of verbalized ideas that can reveal direction toward a solution. You can

start by making word lists of everything that relates to your subject. These lists can help you explore the trail of thoughts influenced by your research. Also, using words is far more time-efficient because you can write a word much faster than you can draw an idea. Keep an open mind to all ideas and let the words flow out without censorship or judgment. Make associations with the word ideas; a dictionary and the thesaurus are helpful tools to facilitate your creative thinking.

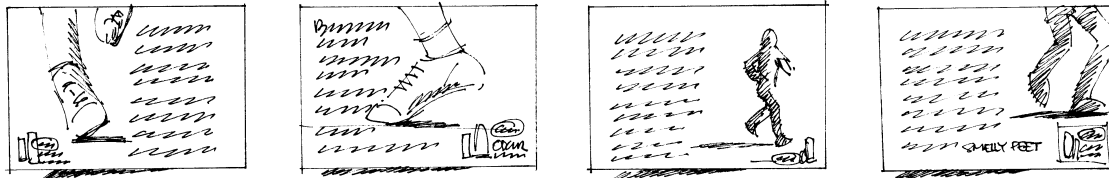
Another effective method used in brainstorming is verbal diagramming or “thought mapping.” This is done by placing a key word in the middle of a piece of paper and branching out in all directions as you write down other ideas that occur and are related to the initial word. You can facilitate this procedure by asking yourself questions: Why? When? Who? How? What? This particular approach lets you picture the structure of your thinking.

If the ideas do not come easily after spending a significant amount of time working on a problem, consider diverting to another activity or task to give your mind an opportunity to process and synthesize all the information you have gathered. Once you return, you will bring a fresh eye to the work.

When you feel you have enough material to work from, begin visualizing your ideas by making thumbnail sketches. A *thumbnail* is a small rough sketch of a preliminary design idea. Try to generate as many of these sketches as possible because every communication problem has an infinite number of possible visual solutions. Your first ideas will probably be your most obvious ideas. Empty your mind of these and continue until it becomes increasingly difficult to think of any others. You will discover that finding unique solutions involves patience and hard work.



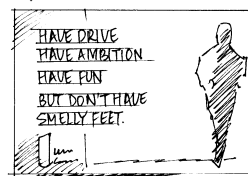
Thumbnails



Layouts

"A good process keeps the mind alert. We progressively layer the material, prepare the way for connections to occur, and get ready for intuitive actions that are informed and appropriate—preventing us from jumping to conclusions prematurely. And while process is more important than result, we respect a good result from a good process."

— Ken Hiebert



From the thumbnails you create, select at least three to develop into layout form. A *layout* is a full-size sketch of the design idea detailing its placement of type, images, and color. They are made to test whether the idea will work once it is drawn at full size. Layouts can be done with markers and a drawing pad or on the computer. Computers permit designers to accomplish numerous possibilities once a concept is identified, without the time-consuming task of having to simulate the type and image by hand. As you compose your variations in whatever media you choose to use, make it a habit to save all the layouts to later review your process.

4. Analyze Your Ideas in Terms of the Project Objectives

Critiques are the best way to articulate your ideas to others and get immediate feedback. When presenting an idea, you should be able to articulate it in one coherent sentence. During the critique, the class analyzes the individual solutions and suggests ways to increase the visual and conceptual impact of each existing idea.

In addition, a critique gives you the opportunity to scrutinize other student solutions. You can identify what works about them and what to avoid in your own work. I usually require students to present multiple solutions during the layout stage because the strongest ideas will always surface. Often you discover that what you tried to say in your layout may not always be what others read into it.

Take notes when your work is being critiqued and do not edit the responses, whether you agree with them or not. Afterward, your notes will give you insight into understanding the feedback offered about your work.

5. Implement the Final

Review your critique notes and reflect on what was said. Then ask yourself how you could combine, transform, or expand the layout that shows the most promise. Once you have determined a course of action, develop the idea into a comprehensive. A comprehensive, or *comp*, is the term used for the very detailed, polished representation of a finished design shown to the client for approval before print production. For design students working on class projects, the comp is the last stage of the design process. As a student, you will need to develop excellent manual and technical skills—a good concept poorly executed will not reveal the potential of your idea to others.

Why Bother with Such a Long Process When I Just Like to Make Things?

All too often, students mistakenly think that the design process begins by turning on a computer without first brainstorming or developing a basic concept. The computer can do much to enhance an existing concept but cannot create it. The practice of graphic design is more than the mere styling of a message.

Another common misconception students often possess is that their creative thinking will be stimulated by looking through design annuals or design magazines. At best this method can trigger an idea for a solution that has been incubating, but more often it leads students to influence and to outright plagiarism. For a solution to possess meaning or significance, it must begin with something to say. It needs content. The content is the meaning or significance contained within any visual message. If you respond with openness and sensitivity throughout the design process, your own personality will emerge and determine the look of the work.

"A creative solution always seems to be one that, when seen, appears obvious, but completely unexpected. Anyone seeing it understands it immediately. It does not require explanation. Everything fits.... You understand it more from an intuitive than from a logical thought process."
— Kit Hinrichs

Why Should I Do These Assignments?

The purpose of graphic design education is to prepare students for professional practice. Therefore, it is project-based rather than subject-based. When students engage in the process of designing they are learning by doing. Teachers create assignments to clarify visual principles and provide direct experience with certain kinds of problems or media. A good assignment will challenge a student to conceptualize and synthesize gathered information into a form that responds to the content. Good design thinking is developed through investigation, experimentation, and genuine curiosity on the part of the designer or design student. In a course, design assignments generally become more complex as students build on the visual vocabularies gained from their previous assignment experiences.

To summarize, the objective for a student of graphic design is to follow the design process to develop and present content in the form of good ideas that fit the parameters of the assignment given. What is a good idea? A good idea is an idea that requires little thought to understand but stimulates the viewer's thinking. A good idea can be expressed without having to be explained. A good idea can communicate instantly. But developing a good idea is only half of the work. To reach an audience, the good

"Whatever our goals we need a foundation—a set of guidelines to use as a reference when making basic design decisions. Such a foundation must be coherent and inclusive. It must provide us with a reference for making a multitude of design decisions, and it must simply rather than complicate the process of designing."

— Suzanne West

idea must be communicated visually. Class critiques help students develop a shared vocabulary for discussion. Critiques provide the opportunity for students to exchange critical and supporting ideas in a peer group setting. Students learn best from one another. To illustrate this point, only student work is used to illustrate graphic design solutions in this book.

